

'THE LORN LAND': A WINTER'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to extract some sense of the genuine experience of peasant life in the north in the harsh winters of this climatic zone. What did the tillers of the land do in the frigid months from November to March? How did they cope with the inhospitable weather —blanketing snows, bitter cold, biting winds, and recurrent frosts that delayed the spring thaw, conditions that transformed the north country into a 'lorn land', a land lost, forsaken, wretched?

KEYWORDS

Agriculture, Peasants, Threshing, Butchering, Folktales.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Agricultura, Rustici, Limen, Carnificum, Fabulae.

One of the greatest English writers, Thomas Hardy, known best perhaps for his series of Wessex novels, of which *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is a supreme achievement, was also an accomplished poet, one of the more accomplished of his or any period in English history. His poem 'Winter in Durnover Field', published in 1901, is a little gem.¹ Hardy introduces the poem and the setting with a bit of simple prose: "a wide stretch of fallow ground recently sown with wheat, and frozen to iron hardness. Three large birds walking about thereon, and wistfully eyeing the surface. Wind keen from north-east: sky a dull grey". It is a typical winter's scene in northern Europe, but the poet imagines the birds—a rook, a starling, and a pigeon—in a dialog. The form is that of a triolet, an English term borrowed from French and signifying in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary* a poem of one "stanza of eight lines, constructed on two rhymes, in which the first line is repeated as the fourth and seventh, and the second as the eighth". The form apparently originated in France in the thirteenth century.² Triolets are like sonnets in that they came to be associated with a distinctive content: sonnets most frequently treat the joys and perils of love; triolets, on the contrary, typically evoke the vicissitudes or romance of the natural world, although the form has been employed for other purposes as well, such as the arousals of erotic love, satire, burlesque and the peace of religious meditation.³

In "Winter in Durnover Field" the rook begins the dialog.

Throughout the field I find no grain;
The cruel frost encrusts the cornland!

The starling replies.

Aye, patient pecking now is vain
Throughout the field, I find no grain.

Despairing, the rook laments.

No grain.

Whereupon the pigeon joins the conversation.

Nor will be, comrade, till it rain,
Or genial thawing loose the lorn land
Throughout the field.

1. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Irwin. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994: 136.

2. Cohen, Helen. *Lyric Forms from France: Their History and Their Use*. New York: Harcourt, 1922: 52.

3. Greene, Roland, ed. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012: 1460; Cohen, Helen. *Lyric Forms from France...*: 63-65.



True to the poetic form, the rook brings the triolet to a close by repeating his desponding lament.

I find no grain:
The cruel frost encrusts the cornland!

The picture elicited by the poem is that of the aftermath of the autumnal planting of the winter wheat in the north, where, following initial below-ground growth stimulation, seed lies dormant for months until conditions suitable for fully realized germination recur and provide farmers with an early crop. The rhythm of medieval and early modern northern European agricultural life, the rhythm around wheat production in particular, is briefly summarized in the words of Allan Greer: “broad undivided expanses were typically devoted, in rotation, to spring wheat, winter wheat and fallow”.⁴ But what did the tillers of the land do in the frigid months of a medieval northern European winter? How did they cope with what Thomas Hardy calls the ‘cruel frosts’ and, one might add, the biting winds, the bitter cold, and the blanketing snows typical of the darkest months of the year, conditions that transformed the north country into a ‘lorn land’, a land lost, forsaken, wretched?

The answer is, first, that farmers labored hard in the winter months. Second, they told stories in the long evenings. And, third, they waited—often in much trepidation—for deliverance by the spring thaw. These are the three issues addressed in this essay—work, storytelling, and expectation. My purpose is to try, in a brief space, to elicit from our sources a sense of what northern European rustics in the heartland of the countryside—English peasants, or French or German or Baltic ones—toiled at in the winter months, told tales about, and feared most. This is a winter’s tale, one directly reflecting the lives and livelihood of more than ninety percent of the northern European population in the High Middle Ages.

1. Work

The first point that needs to be made about work amounts to a criticism of existing scholarship or, rather, of the syntheses that undertake to summarize it for non-specialists. Too often general books lament the burden of peasant labor in the northern climes without furnishing details, details that turn out to be crucial for understanding medieval life. It is true that such books acknowledge that rural women and girls, like their urban counterparts, continued to spin and weave in the short daylight hours of winter.⁵ But much more varied labor was going on in the

4. Greer, Allan. “Confusion on the Commons”. *Books & Ideas.net*. 8 December 2014. Collège de France. 21 September 2015 <<http://www.booksandideas.net/Confusion-on-the-Commons.html>>.

5. Bardsley, Sandy. *Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages*. Westport-London: Greenwood Press, 2007: 65-66; Spivey, Donna. “Evangelies des Quenouilles”, *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, Margaret Schaus, ed. New York: Routledge, 2006: 266; Wiesner, Merry E. “Germanic Lands”, *Women and*



household and community. The toil of village and domestic life did not slow during this season —except on the lorn fields, a fact that may explain some workscape anomalies in medieval calendar representations.⁶ February, in particular, is usually illustrated symbolically with fishing, which is not a February labor in the north, but is inserted there in order to call to mind the Lenten season.⁷

The first subject to explore is work routines with respect to grains. One of the principal tasks facing the peasant in the autumn was dealing with the sheaves that had been harvested from the summer wheat crop and other cereals. The initial challenge was to estimate the amount of grain likely to be harvested. One could get a rough sense or might make a guess in the first instance of how good the yields (*responsiones*) would be from the appearance of the standing crops even before reaping began: did they appear to be generally healthy, and was there sufficient density for a bumper crop? However, it was not certain that this general sense would be borne out, for it was possible to be misled by appearances. Rather, a peasant had to examine parts of the harvested crop closely (*per mensuracionem granarii et examinacionem vt in visu*) and even perhaps sample it by threshing, which is to say, literally thrashing, a more or less random selection of the stacked sheaves to determine how much grain or seed had actually been produced on the plants that season.⁸

As pointed out, medieval calendar art is not always accurate about work cycles, the idealized scenes having sometimes been adopted from one regional manuscript tradition with different labor rhythms to another without emendation.⁹ But the calendars in making late autumn the threshing period accurately reflect the initial sample threshing and some other specialized threshing, as, for example, for milling and shipping to towns as well as for young seed corn to be sold in the marketplace.¹⁰ Thirteenth-century estate managers and commentators, like Walter of Henley and Robert Grosseteste, advised that the seeds planted should come in part from earlier harvests, in part from the most recent harvest, and in part purchased from seed

Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia, Margaret Schaus, ed. New York: Routledge, 2006: 320; Archer, Janice. "Home Manufacturing", *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*, Margaret Schaus, ed. New York: Routledge, 2006: 374. See also: Mate, Mavis. *Women in Medieval English Society*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1999: 56.

6. Mane, Perrine. *Calendriers et techniques agricoles (France-Italie, XIIe-XIIIe siècles)*. Paris: Le Sycomore, 1983: 140-243; Pearsall, Derek; Salter, Elizabeth. *Landscape and Seasons of the Medieval World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973: 119-60.

7. Mane, Perrine. "Images médiévales de la pêche en eau douce". *Journal des savants*, 3-4 (1991): 228-29; Mane, Perrine. *Calendriers et techniques agricoles...*: 140-54; Comet, Georges. "Les calendriers médiévaux, une représentation du monde". *Journal des savants*, 1 (1992): 53.

8. Harvey, Paul Dean Adshead. *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham, 1240-1400*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965: 55; Postles, David. "Manorial Accountancy of God's House, Southampton". *Archives*, 18 (1987): 38-39.

9. Comet, Georges. "Les calendriers médiévaux...": 35-98; Comet, Georges. *Le paysan et son outil: essai d'histoire technique des céréales (France, VIIIe-XVe siècle)*. Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1992: 504-22; Henisch, Bridget. "In Due Season: Farm Work in the Medieval Calendar Tradition", *Agriculture in the Middle Ages*, Del Sweeney, ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995: 314.

10. Collins, Marie; Davis, Virginia. *A Medieval Book of Seasons*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1990: 98-99.



marketed by other farmers, perhaps one-third from each source, which is not to say that this advice was always followed.¹¹ On the evidence of the sampling that farmers undertook and from the quality and quantity per field of the threshed grain for market, estate managers, village elders and individual householders made decisions about how much unthreshed grain to store for the winter so as not to put either their communities and their work and food-animals at risk, on the one hand, or to jeopardize the contribution of the harvest to the next two years' seed corn, on the other. In other words, despite the impression given by the illuminated calendars of the autumn months, a very large quantity of the harvests remained unthreshed and stowed away in barns as winter set in.

Why unthreshed? Nowadays threshing all harvested grain at once is regarded as a better preventative against spoilage, since the stems and the exterior of the seed casings may contain pathogens. But threshing on this scale implies that the grain itself can be dried quickly and effectively to prevent rot. During the growing season, medieval *preventative* methods, now richly documented by Jan Zadok, probably had a beneficial effect in lessening the natural contaminants in crops.¹² But even so, many remained in and on them. Mechanical drying has a strongly positive effect in inhibiting bacterial growth, but was not a widely available option in the Middle Ages, despite the existence of some drying ovens.¹³ Alternatively, sun drying might have done the job, but sun drying depends on exposing the grain to long periods of strong sunlight *and* on a low incidence and low intensity of evening damps and morning dews. Abundant moisture, on the contrary, promoted molds, mildews, rusts and other harmful fungal growths in growing plants and some harvested ones. In growing plants, for example, rusts—in particular, *Puccinia triticina*—notoriously reduced yields in wheat.

Medieval farmers in northern Europe were risk averse on these matters. True, they got their sheaves as dry as possible in the open air, teddering (raking) them while the sun shone and creating haystacks on ricks (*tassicali*) in fine weather, but then they gathered them into barns because of the danger of rain. There the farmers periodically turned the sheaves with rakes to continue the drying process. Village by-laws, expressing the collective will of the community, mandated these activities.¹⁴

In cases in which the summer and autumn estimates of yields were high, making northern rustics confident about the overall harvest, some of the young barley grain was set apart and converted to ale or, by the admixture of hops, to beer, which

11. Coss, Peter. *Lordship, Knighthood and Locality: A Study in English Society c. 1180-c.1280*. Cambridge (Mass.): Cambridge University Press, 1991: 101; Stern, Derek; Thornton, Christopher. *A Hertfordshire Demesne of Westminster Abbey: Profits, Productivity and Weather*. Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999: 31, note 39.

12. Zadok, Jan. *Crop Protection in Medieval Agriculture: Studies in Pre-Modern Organic Agriculture*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2013.

13. Desai, Babasaheb B. *Seeds Handbook: Biology, Production, Processing, and Storage*. New York: Marcel Dekker, 2004: 74.

14. Ault, Warren. *Open-Field Farming in Medieval England: A Study of Village By-Laws*. London-New York: Allen and Unwin-Barnes and Noble, 1972: 25.



kept longer.¹⁵ But, to repeat, a large part of harvested sheaves of all cereals was put away into barns. And one of the fundamental work routines in the winter months was the regular periodic threshing of part of the sheaves, followed by its hand milling into flour.¹⁶ There was a rich vocabulary of this work, reflecting the physical experience of the task. The word threshing, as already remarked, is merely a form of the English word thrashing, meaning to beat hard, for the stalks had to be beaten hard so as to dislodge the grain from the seed pockets, which constituted the chaff (*die Spreu, la bal[l]e*). The German usage for threshing, *das Dreschen*, and the French, *le battage*, parallel English. Both signify being beaten.

The complementary word, ‘winnowing’, and its counterparts in French, *le vanner*, and the now archaic German, *das Worfeln*, evoke images, too. All these words go back to roots indicating the blowing of wind on or the shaking away of the chaff, for it was not simply the dislodging of the seeds that was necessary. On the contrary, the dry and very lightweight husks needed to be blown away and discarded or separated over a slatted threshing floor (*der Dreschboden, l’aire de battage*). Typically this was achieved in the pre-modern period either by shaking and blowing the threshed grain in a pan or by the use of winnowing forks, rakes, flails and fans (*der Dreschflegel, die Getreideschwinge, die Worfel; le fléau*) to toss and shake the grain and help whisk the chaff away.¹⁷

In the wintertime, all of this labor necessarily took place indoors and in carefully monitored conditions, carefully monitored because the chaff and the dust distributed in the air by the threshing and winnowing were highly flammable and, if ignited, could burst into roaring and consuming fire in a confined space.¹⁸ The image is a vivid one and has given Christians one of their most arresting images of hell. One need only recall John the Baptist’s awe-inspiring descriptions of Judgment Day in the Gospel of Matthew (3.12) and the Gospel of Luke (3.17): The Lord’s “fan [*ventilabrum* in the Vulgate] is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (AV). Thus, week after week the threshing and winnowing rooms were uncomfortably cold workplaces (one could not risk having warming fires in them), but they were even more dangerous for other reasons, arguing back from the present-day findings of the United Kingdom’s Health and Safety Executive (UKHSE).¹⁹ Every laborer

15. Adamson, Melitta. *Food in Medieval Times*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004: 48; Stone, David J. “The Consumption of Food Crops in Late Medieval England”, *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, Christopher M. Woolgar, Dale Sergeantson, Tony Waldron, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006: 11-22; Henisch, Bridget. *The Medieval Cook*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009: 69; Greville Pounds, Norman John. *An Economic History of Medieval Europe*. New York: Routledge 1994: 199.

16. Slicher van Bath, Bernard Hendrik. *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850*. London: E. Arnold, 1963: 70; Homans, George. *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. New York: University of Michigan Library-Scholarly Publishing Office, 1975: 356-57.

17. Homans, George. *English Villagers...*: 356-57.

18. Cheremisinoff, Nicholas. “Appendix A: General Guidelines on Safe Work Practice”, *Dust Explosion and Fire Prevention Handbook: A Guide to Good Industry Practices*. Salem: Scrivener Publishing, 2014: 319-48.

19. “Grain Dust”. *Health and Safety Executive*. 18 September 2015 <<http://www.hse.gov.uk/agriculture/topics/grain-dust.htm>>.



even if lightly masked inhaled chaff dust. Eyes, nose and throat were irritated. Tears, sneezing and fits of coughing provided short-term relief, but frequent tearing up, sneezing and coughing were irritants in themselves, putting stress on the lachrymal glands, nasal passages, and the throat and lungs. Seed cases also caused discomfort by getting into the hair, when the head covering slipped, and also under clothing, resulting in the chafing of the scalp and body skin. At their worst—in its chronic form—the harm to the pulmonary system from doing the work of indoor threshing and winnowing can be devastating. The condition is known today as farmer’s lung. It can severely disable and occasionally cause death. Although threshing in enclosed spaces over long periods aggravated other problems that commenced, according to the UKHSE, with “harvesting, drying, handling, [and] storage”, threshing and winnowing were particularly problematic in the Middle Ages because the longer the grain was stored, the more likely it was to accrue new contaminants, like “bacteria, endotoxin, fungal spores, insects and insect debris,” which polluted the air in the threshing rooms during the process.

The conditions I have described were miserable, but laborers probably did not appreciate the long-term consequences of repeated exposure for their health. And in any case, it was a great deal better to have some sheaves to thresh and winnow—and to suffer this routine with its attendant unpleasantness—than to have no granary work to do in the short days of the frigid northern winters and come face to face with the specter of starvation. The grain itself which was accumulated from the process was freer of contaminants than the discarded chaff, and many contaminants that still adhered to the grain floated to the top when the latter was rinsed. Cooking also killed or disabled many residual natural contaminants, like the mycotoxins produced by fungi, though by no means all of them.²⁰

Grain may very well have been the chief concern in work routines, but animals were a close second. The early winter was first a time of slaughter, but not in the sense of large proportions of flocks or herds. And even the measured slaughtering of early winter was reduced thereafter. Indeed, to a certain extent slaughtering helped preserve the majority of the flock and herd animals. The slaughter of sheep, swine and cattle that were injured or too old to likely survive the enclosed spaces of the winter as well as the slaughter of excessive numbers of livestock for which there was insufficient space was necessary and intense business.²¹ First, the animal was stunned, usually by a blow with a cudgel to the head, rendering it docile.²² Then, the throat was slit.²³ The blood that flowed from the wounds made to the great arteries and veins that had once taken the life fluid from head to heart and back again was reserved for use in cooking, especially in the making of sausage from

20. Bosco, Francesca; Mollea, Chiara. “Mycotoxins in Food”, *Food Industrial Processes. Methods and Equipment*, Benjamin Valdez, ed. Rijeka: InTech, 2012: 169-170 <<http://www.intechopen.com/books/food-industrial-processes-methods-and-equipment>> (Consulted 23th December 2015).

21. Homans, George. *English Villagers...*: 356; Slicher van Bath, Bernard Hendrik. *The Agrarian History...*: 182 and 297.

22. Brears, Peter. *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England*. Totnes: Prospect books, 2008: 164.

23. Brears, Peter. *Cooking and Dining...*: 164.



the offal and organ meats.²⁴ Immersing the dead animals or their skinned pelts in scalding water helped loosen the bristles, which had various uses. Or, in the case of inferior bristles the carcass might be lightly singed to destroy them. There is a classic description of traditional practices in Henry Stephens's *Book of the Farm*.²⁵ The hides were retained, when they were good, and were outsourced after the butchering to the village tanner for transformation into leather, which itself became work aprons (girdles), harness, shoes, and the like.²⁶ By-products had a future in being rendered into glue.²⁷

Eviscerating carcasses to recover organ meats and discard wastes in the lower alimentary canal was foul business. Disarticulating the carcasses thereafter was also a messy affair and required a good working knowledge, as butchers still have, of where best to find the weakness in the joints. The big pieces of the beasts' flesh and bone were then dried—sometimes by pressing, sometimes by salting, sometimes by smoking in smoke houses for preservation.²⁸ Men did the heavy work of hanging the loins, butts and shoulder pieces from the roofs of the smoke houses so that vermin and farm dogs could not get at them.

Men and women kept the smoky fires going—and closely contained—to facilitate the curing process.²⁹ The outer surfaces of hams and slabs of bacon wrinkled and contracted over time, and though mold could and often did grow on the rind, it did little or no damage to the preserved flesh and fat within and in some cases improved flavor.³⁰ Only recently have food scientists become more suspicious of the effect of the molds' toxicity.³¹ In any case, like beef jerky, which people still snack on today, what one might call the shelf life of cured meats was enormous and provided welcome variety for the otherwise grain-based winter diet. Such variety was enhanced by preserved root vegetables, like turnips, and fruits, especially apples. Healthy cabbages were also harvested and then reburied—shallow and upside down—at the onset of winter.³² Every once in a while a head of cabbage was dug

24. Davidson, Alan; Jaine, Tom, eds. "Blood Sausages". *The Oxford Companion to Food*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677337.001.0001/acref-9780199677337-e-0268?rskey=hi6fvO&result=1>> (Consulted 23rd December 2015).

25. Stephens, Henry. *Book of the Farm: Detailing the Labours of the Farmer, Farm-Steward, Ploughman, Shepherd, Hedger, Cattle-Man, Field-Worker and Dairy-Maid*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and sons, 1844: II, 238-39.

26. Burns, Claire. "The Tanning Industry of Medieval Britain". *CJA Anthrojournal*. 15 June 2012. The Collegiate Journal of Anthropology. 23 December 2015 <<http://anthrojournal.com/issue/october-2011/article/the-tanning-industry-of-medieval-britain>>.

27. Blair, John; Ramsay, Nigel. *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products*. London: Hambledon Press, 1991: 304.

28. Laurioux, Bruno. *Manger au moyen âge: pratiques et discours alimentaires en Europe aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles*. Paris: Persee, 2002: 79-80; Newman, Paul. *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2001: 5.

29. Bardsley, Sandy. *Women's Roles...* 65.

30. Toldrá, Fidel, ed. *Handbook of Meat Processing*. Ames: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010: 228 and 369.

31. Toldrá, Fidel, ed. *Handbook of Meat...*: 373-374.

32. Dembińska, Maria; Weaver, William. *Food and Drink in Medieval Poland: Rediscovering a Cuisine of the Past*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999: 125. The technique was still widely used in the early twentieth century; Smith, G. E. "Late Cabbage". *Market Growers Journal*, 20 (1917): 464.



up for soup; the vegetable kept well in the earth throughout the season. Cabbages were thus the king of winter foods, especially for the poor, eaten sometimes "three or four times a day", according to research concerning various regions carried out by Melitta Adamson, Bruno Laurioux, and others.³³ Apples after harvesting were either converted into cider, in regions where the trees were intensively cultivated, like Devonshire and Normandy, or they were carefully stored in dry places where they shriveled, without losing their flavor or utility for cooked compotes served in the winter months.³⁴ Pears and quinces had similar staying qualities and played a similar role in the rustics' liquid diet (perry and quince-wine) and in their fruit compotes over the winter.³⁵

Animals, as noted, were slaughtered and preserved as part of late autumn and early winter's work, in order to provide food through the cold season, to meet an otherwise "pent-up longing for meat", in the memorable words of Bridget Henisch, one of the most prolific specialists on medieval foodways.³⁶ But throughout the winter men and women had to tend to the surviving penned-up animals which they wanted to survive the cold months.³⁷ These animals, cows and sheep in particular, but also horses and oxen (that is castrated bulls), entered barns and folds healthy, otherwise they would have been slaughtered, but keeping them healthy over the winter required considerable effort. Fodder was essential. Oats were preferred for horses.³⁸ But otherwise hay was "about the only good fodder for animals penned up in winter".³⁹ Thus, hay and other less valued crops were stored in abundance to meet their needs, and, of course, the stalks of threshed sheaves contributed to the fodder supply regularly throughout the winter.⁴⁰ Young children could help feed the animals by keeping the mangers (*presepie*) full and the troughs supplied with water, but this too was mostly onerous labor, buckets of water being especially heavy, and so this task was ordinarily undertaken by adult men and women or at least adolescents.⁴¹

33. Adamson, Melitta. *Food in Medieval Times*...: 135; Laurioux, Bruno. *Manger au moyen âge*...: 61.

34. Adamson, Melitta. *Food in Medieval Times*...: 19; Davidson, Alan; Jaine, Tom, eds. "Apple". *The Oxford Companion*... <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199677337.001.0001/acref-9780199677337-e-0081?rskey=vkSbch&result=1>> (Consulted 23th December 2015).

35. Henisch, Bridget. *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*. University Park-London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976: 114; Brears, Peter. *Cooking and Dining*...: 105-07.

36. Henisch, Bridget. *Medieval Cook*...: 35.

37. Bardsley, Sandy. *Women's Roles*...: 66; Mate, Mavis. *Women in Medieval*...: 3. See also various entries in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*: Hettinger, Madonna J. "Agriculture"; Hettinger, Madonna J. "Peasant Households"; Bitel, Lisa. "Legal Status"; Skinner, Patricia. "Peasant Women"; Bardsley, Sandra. "Peasant Women's Work". *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* Margaret Schaus, ed. New York: Routledge, 2006: 12, 381, 409, 417 and 642 respectively.

38. Langdon, John. "The Economics of Horses and Oxen in Medieval England". *Agricultural History Review*, 30 (1982): 31-40; Pounds, Norman John Greville. *Economic History*...: 203; Cumo, Christopher. *Foods That Changed History: How Foods Shaped Civilization from the Ancient World to the Present*. Santa Barbara: Credo Reference, 2015: 240.

39. Ault, Warren. *Open-Field Farming*...: 25.

40. Langdon, John. "The Economics of Horses..." : 31-40.

41. Bardsley, Sandy. *Women's Roles*...: 67; Mate, Marvis. *Women in Medieval*...: 3.



It was in part a matter of good fortune if livestock, penned up so close together, escaped communicable diseases, but at least winter was not the worst season, speaking in terms of the natural history of the relevant pathogens, for epizootics.⁴² Moreover, the fact that the animals tended to be standing on dirt surfaces in their barns and holding pens had genuine benefits. The manure was regularly collected and set aside in open-air dung heaps for future enrichment of the soil in gardens and small home fields.⁴³ The animals' urine soaked the dirt of the barn and pen floors where they were kept, turning it into a viscous muddy mire. Given the chemical composition of urine, its fermentation produces ammonia which is a natural anti-pathogen. That is to say, it kills a great many germs that otherwise cause diseases among the flocks and herds. This fact was reported as early as 1895 by the British chemist and Fellow of University College, London, Samuel Rideal, but pre-modern peasants enjoyed the benefits even lacking a lab scientist's explanation.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, nothing could forestall each and every pathogen from affecting wintering livestock, and disease did occasionally appear among the penned-up animals. If it did, men—usually men—had to act quickly to cull the infected beasts and burn their carcasses to stop the spread of the disease.

There was another type of winter work that a flourishing village in the core of medieval settlement, say, in the countryside of Champagne or Picardy, might require even in the thirteenth-century. But it was a kind of work, known as assarting, which was also more aggressively needed on the so-called frontiers of settlement further east along the Baltic coast and inland from the eastern Baltic.⁴⁵ Villages were growing in population in the core because of a century-long excess of births over deaths in the 1200s, and it was necessary sometimes to expand arable fields as a result. Immigrants to the frontiers had the same need of increasing arable, but more acutely, to provide for food or increase its supply. Wintertime witnessed one important phase of meeting these needs. Collective decisions taken many, many months before had their consequence in the winter. Those decisions, to create new or to expand old fields, meant that the big trees in potentially new arable were ring barked; peasants excised a circular belt of bark on the trunk of each one destined for felling and removal.

These cuts were just deep enough to sever the vessels that carried water and nutrients up the trees. The trees died. Equally important they began to dry out and to lose their tensile strength, thus requiring less force (manpower) to cause the wood to fracture. Months later, in wintertime, they were ready to be hewn. Hardy men, very hardy men, went out and undertook this brutally difficult work in the

42. Agrios, George. *Plant Pathology*. Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2005: 100-02.

43. For most of the information in this paragraph, see: Dyer, Christopher. "Sheepcotes: Evidence for Medieval Sheepfarming". *Medieval Archaeology*, 39 (1995): 136-64.

44. Rideal, Samuel. *Disinfection and Disinfectants (an Introduction to the Study of), together with an Account of the Chemical Substances Used as Antiseptics and Preservatives*. London: Griffin, 1895: 109.

45. Most of the documentation for the assertions in this and the next two paragraphs is assembled in: Jordan, William Chester. *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996: 27-30, 91, 98-99 and 105.



cold. One should recall that it was in the north that the great hardwoods flourished—maple, elm, oak, beech, and the hardest of them all, ash. Even prepared as I have described, an ash tree was a formidable opponent. There is a reason that the ash tree figures so prominently in the lore of the north, although the Norse mythological world tree, Yggdrasil, popularly regarded as an ash, was a needle-bearing evergreen.⁴⁶ In any case, it was a daunting task to go out to woods after a big warm bowl of breakfast gruel and work toward bringing down an ash tree. It was endurance work for the axe-men.

When great ash trees and the other hardwoods were felled, it was but one step in the process of creating arable. The trunks were potential lumber and were easier to move over frozen ground than over the spongy ground of spring or through the woody shoots and heavy leaf cover of summer and autumn respectively. The limbs and branches that broke off in the crash of great hardwoods to earth or were lopped off by the woodsmen thereafter were gathered up, like the bark that was stripped, as firewood for peasant homesteads or for use in the smoke houses, where hardwood, which burned hotter and slower than softwood, was preferred. “Hardwoods (deciduous, broadleaved tree species)”, as the UK’s Biomass Energy Center reports, “tend to be denser than softwoods (evergreen, coniferous species). [...] Denser wood tends to burn for a longer period of time meaning fewer ‘top ups’ are required to keep a log stove burning for a given length of time”.⁴⁷ Women and older children joined with the men in the work of topping up the fuel and monitoring the fire. After an exhausting day of such labor—felling trees, stripping branches and bark, stacking wood so it could cure, feeding the fires with already seasoned logs and bark—nothing was better, one may be tempted to believe, than a pot of ale, some bread, and a hearty cabbage soup seasoned with a piece of smoked or salt pork all followed by an apple compote. At least farmers could put off trying to remove the stumps; this was easier in spring when the ground was softer and firewood could be placed at tree root level, where digging had given access, for a partial burning. The burning weakened the attachment of the stumps to the land, loosening them sufficiently for the draft animals that did the pulling for the final extrication.

46. Hageneder, Fred. *The Meaning of Trees: Botany, History, healing, Lore*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005: 105.

47. Rolls, Will. “Wood as fuel a guide to choosing and drying logs”, *Forestry Commission* <[http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-woodfuel-woodasfuelguide.pdf/\\$FILE/eng-woodfuel-woodasfuelguide.pdf](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/pdf/eng-woodfuel-woodasfuelguide.pdf/$FILE/eng-woodfuel-woodasfuelguide.pdf)> (Consulted 28th December 2015).



2. Storytelling

Medieval illustrations from calendars depict many indoor scenes for the winter months, mostly related to work.⁴⁸ There is a noticeable absence, however, of scenes depicting women and children until the later Middle Ages and the onset of the plague cycle and its accompanying perceived labor shortages.⁴⁹ Yet, a great deal of what went on after the daily work routine came to an end in every winter was storytelling, in which, if medieval practice was similar to that of the early modern centuries, older women played a key role and from which children benefitted enormously.⁵⁰ Storytelling offered a way to recall the little domestic heroisms of the past and the quirkiness of one's ancestors. Stories provided cautionary tales for the children. And storytelling also—and repeatedly—emphasized justice and retribution for ills suffered at the hands and whims of the mighty, such as local lords, estate managers and millers. The indices of tale types and motifs, prepared and improved over many decades, provide support for all the foregoing statements.⁵¹ Less structured, but perhaps equally important was gossip, the kind of stories told to represent one's own family as superior to other families in a village or to represent one's own village as superior to nearby settlements or to discredit social enemies.⁵²

Thanks to the labor of early folklorists who collected many of the tales in the nineteenth century, before industrialization had wholly disrupted the pre-modern rhythms of rural life, current scholars are well informed about folktales. It is true that the study of folktales is fraught with challenges.⁵³ Old women interviewed in the nineteenth century were quite capable of doctoring a story for the benefit of the inquirer wanting to hear it and write it down. Our nineteenth-century sources are far removed from the stories told in the same region or village in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, it is not in the details that something of the tenor of pre-modern rural life is revealed, but in the overall themes. To mention just two: many folktales recovered in rural settlements in the nineteenth century emphasize the precariousness of the food supply over the winter season. Whether the concern is expressed through talking animals wondering where their next meal will come from, or by violence among men and animals, the theme is the same—where can more meat be had, where can more nice cabbages be found, from whom can

48. Mane, Perrine. *Calendriers et techniques...* : 94-99.

49. Mane, Perrine. *Calendriers et techniques...* : 99 and 135-36; Henisch, Bridget. "In Due Season"....: 326-30.

50. Haase, Donald, ed. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*. 3 vols. Westport-London: Greenwood Press, 2008: II, 626; Spivey, Donna. "Evangiles des...": 266.

51. Aarne, Antti; Thompson, Stith. *The Types of the Folk Tale: a classification and bibliography*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1973; Thompson, Stith. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

52. The literature is extensive. One may begin with: Phillips, Susan. *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007; Wickham, Chris. "Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry". *Past and Present*, 160 (1998): 3-24.

53. For a succinct review of the history and challenges of the field, see: Haase, Donald, ed. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia...*: I, xxxiii-xxxix.



stored grain be stolen. There are moral underpinnings to the tales. For they, too, are cautionary: one must beware and vigilant against vermin— and also against bad men who would kill and steal if given the opportunity rather than labor and share.

A second pervasive theme is loneliness. Nothing seems worse in some of the folktales than to be alone in the wintertime or, more especially, to be alone *and old* in wintertime. Sometimes generous and talking animals enter the lonely household of an old woman, according to a tale, and comfort her with the warmth of their bodies, with food they have scavenged, and with companionship. But the cautionary note is present in these stories, too. Hearers of such tales are being reminded that they should live their lives so as not to come to such desperate straits. They should during all their lifetime cultivate close and affectionate ties with their neighbors and particularly their kin. Gossip, to be sure, sometimes ran at cross purposes with the moral thrust of the stories themed by loneliness. Or, perhaps, it is fairer to say, that they complement each other. The stories implore the listener to make and keep friends; gossip reminds him or her to make and keep the right kind of friends. In the end—in old age—the reward for such circumspection would be great: one would not need to rely on the miracle of sympathetic beasts for companionship or survival.

Good friendships with good neighbors represent a kind of egalitarian notion, although divisions among the peasantry based on wealth ranged fairly widely even in the prosperous thirteenth century; in the fourteenth century these divisions became more acute.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, despite internal peasant rivalries, a deeper and extensively documented well of resentment concentrated on those who had allegedly ‘licit’ power, the lords. A special case pertains to the communities suffering what scholars now call ethnic strife, that is to say, communities where the lords were understood to be of different stock than the peasants. Many villages in north central and northeastern Europe came under German and German-speaking lordship in the time of the *Drang nach dem Osten*, the movement of German migrants into Slavic and Baltic lands in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth century, a movement that was certainly not always violent, but where there were plenty of instances of violence nonetheless.⁵⁵ In cases in which German lordship was successfully imposed and persisted for considerable time over native non-German speaking peasants, resentments festered.

How does one know? Thanks to the heroic efforts of investigators who have been collecting data for two hundred years, a vast array of proverbial sayings (*dainas*) about this lordship and the relations that followed from it in the eastern Baltic region is available for study.⁵⁶ The *dainas* are in effect the morals derived from the stories peasants were telling around the hearth in wintertime about lords

54. Jordan, William Chester. *From Servitude to Freedom: Manumission in the Sénonais in the Thirteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986: 9-10 and 98.

55. Urban, William. “The Wendish Princes and the ‘Drang nach dem Osten’”. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 9 (1978): 225-244; Urban, William. *The Baltic Crusade*. Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1994.

56. The observations on the *dainas* depend on: Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice of the Oppressed: Master, Slave, and Serf in the Baltic Provinces”. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 34 (2003): 1-21.



who abused their power. Here, to borrow from the title of a fine essay by Maruta Ray, one comes close to “Recovering the Voice of the Oppressed”. One collection amounts to more than two million three hundred thousand such sayings, not all of which, of course, are about the social relations of production.⁵⁷ But the themes that are about these relations are what one expects—and offer a fitting transition to the third and last part of this paper on what peasants feared and resented. That the themes are unsurprising or might have been deduced logically from the very constitution of economic and political power on the frontier does not undermine the utility of having such massive documentation. It is actually, for a medievalist, quite comforting.

3. Fear

The manors and estates on which peasants worked were said over and over again in these sources to be a “locus of oppression”.⁵⁸ Serfdom brought disruption of families.⁵⁹ Servile—unfree—status brought shame on the bearers of the status.⁶⁰ Whether the shame was felt to be deserved (had peasants internalized the ideologies of the superordinate classes?) or undeserved (did they resist those ideologies?) are difficult questions. Probably, some did and others did not. Either way, the proverbs speak incessantly to the brutality of corporal punishment and the absence of legal redress in the frontier regions.⁶¹ They speak of helplessness in the face of seizures of property, of abuse of peasant women, of excessive child labor and of disabling work routines imposed by lords and, of course, the danger of food scarcity as so-called surpluses (so-called by the upper class) were appropriated by the seigneurial aristocracy.⁶² It is not to be expected that antagonism to lordship by peasants and the mercenary practices of lords was as intense in the core lands of Catholic Christendom as they were on the ethnically riven frontiers of Central and Eastern Europe. But in muted form, they were there, and, as the works of Gadi Algazi and Paul Freedman show (just to name two), the fourteenth century saw peasants and lords in agonistic relations in England, France and Flanders, not just far away on the Slavic and Baltic frontiers of Catholic Europe.⁶³ Stories told in peasant households during the long winters of the north constructed fantasies of retribution for ill-

57. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 2.

58. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 4-5.

59. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 5.

60. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 6.

61. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 6-7.

62. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 7-11.

63. Algazi, Gadi. “Pruning Peasants: Private War and Maintaining the Lord’s Peace in Late Medieval Germany”, *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power and Gifts in Context*, Esther Cohen, Mayke de Jong, eds. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000: 245-274; Freedman, Paul. *Images of the Medieval Peasant*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999: 133-173.



treatment at the hand of legal, economic and social superiors and were themselves, like the proverbial sayings, a form of psychic resistance in the eastern Baltic and elsewhere.⁶⁴

If tales emphasizing fear of the abuses of lordship were a staple of wintertime storytelling, there were other more elemental fears as well. I have already mentioned food shortages. Lords were not always or perhaps even usually responsible for the storage shortfalls that kept peasant barns from being full at winter’s onset. The slow steady consumption of reserves was inevitable, but it was calibrated with great care to the level of the reserves available at the start of the winter season. However, men and women grew ever more apprehensive when winter seemed to prolong itself and laugh to scorn their efforts to apportion their foodstuffs to last the duration. They knew that babies born when their mothers’ want was great had a lesser chance of survival.⁶⁵ Who did not hope and pray for an end to the storms bringing winter-like cold, snow and blustery winds? There is a reason village church bells were blessed and named. The ritual spoke to the desire that ringing them might serve as talismans against unseasonable weather or that seemingly abandoned cult sites might be sought out in the desire to appease the old gods of the Balto-Slavs under the same circumstances.⁶⁶ Peasants also dreaded epizootics, infrequent as their incidence was, and they dreaded their animals’ fodder running out, a factor that might induce villagers to put them out to pasture early, in a thaw, only to see them suffer from an icy change of weather that could decimate the herds and flocks.⁶⁷ There was indeed very much to fear.

4. Conclusion

And yet, how to conclude? None of what I have written is meant to imply that peasants of the north were typically consumed by fear or by obsessive and disabling hatred of lordship, except perhaps on the violence-prone frontier, or were bound to such laborious work routines in the long winters of the north as to lose all hope. True disasters, like famine, were rare in any village, although not unknown (1257,

64. Ray, Maruta. “Recovering the Voice...”: 12-16; Freedman, Paul. *Images of the Medieval...*: 177-235.

65. Newman, Paul. *Growing up in the Middle Ages*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2007: 20.

66. Leclercq-Marx, Jacqueline. “‘Vox dei clamat in tempestate’: à propos de l’iconographie des vents et d’un groupe d’inscriptions campanaires (IXe-XIIIe siècles)”. *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 42 (1999): 185-187; Urtāns, Juris. “Latvian Sandstone Caves as Cultural Phenomena”. *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 32 (2001): 96.

67. Jordan, William Chester. *Great Famine...*: 35-39; Jordan, William Chester. “Charms to Ward Off Sheep and Pig Murrain”, *Medieval Christianity in Practice*, Miri Rubin, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009: 67-75; Slavin, Philip. “Flogging a Dead Cow: Coping with Animal Panzootic on the Eve of the Black Death”, *Crises in Economic and Social History: A Comparative Perspective*, Alex T. Brown, Andy Burn, Rob Doherty, eds. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015: 120-122.



1315-1322).⁶⁸ Winter also was not a time of war; medieval armies ravaged the countryside and thus committed their atrocities in the warm sunny months, when they knew there was plenty of food to be had.⁶⁹ One would also do well to take the village church and local shrines seriously and the psychological and spiritual sustenance they provided to local folk.⁷⁰ Winter holiday festivals, like Christmas, had the potential of rescuing lonely people from their solitude.⁷¹ Those who could not or were not minded to take part, however, suffered even more and were further disabled by their loneliness. Moreover, even at the most festive times, of course, indeed always at the back of any northern peasant's mind in the winter, there remained that fundamental uncertainty already alluded to, as to when the winter season would finally end, when the winter wheat would send forth its shoots, when the earth could again be worked to yield its bounty, when the land would no longer be lorn, when the cycle of life would begin anew.

This essay began with a poem. Let it end with one, Thomas Carew's "The Spring", written around 1640, not quite medieval and assuredly not 'crude' rustic verse, but a few lines of which capture what many a peasant must have felt as the seasons shifted in late March or April. The very metaphors (linen robes, candy, cream, silver, crystal) intimate the Cockaigne hopes —utopia— the medieval "fantasy of the perfect life", that had only intensified among villagers as winter began to draw to its close.⁷² Thus, even winter, in a kind of ironic retrospective, could be remembered/imagined as foretelling Cockaigne.

Now that the winter's gone, the earth hath lost
Her snow-white robes, and now no more the frost
Candies the grass, or casts an icy cream
Upon the silver lake or crystal stream;
But the warm sun thaws the benumbed earth,
And makes it tender.⁷³

68. Keene, Derek. "Crisis Management in London's Food Supply, 1250-1500", *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Richard Britnell*, Ben Dodds, Christian Liddy, eds. Woodbridge: Boydell et Brewer, 2011: 50-57; Jordan, William Chester. *Great Famine...*

69. Nicholson, Helen. *Medieval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War in Europe 300-1500*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004: 124.

70. French, Katherine. *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001: 175-207.

71. There is a wealth of material scattered through, Cosman, Madeleine. *Medieval Holidays and Festivals: A Calendar of Celebrations*. New York: Scribner, 1981.

72. Pleij, Herman. *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

73. Carew, Thomas. *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Arthur Vincent. London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1899: 1.

